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## INTRODUCTION:

### NATION BRANDING AND COMPETITIVE IDENTITY IN WORLD POLITICS

*To date (critical) geopolitics has had little to say about contemporary competitive identity practices of nation branding in global politics, while existing analyses of nation branding in other disciplines have tended to overlook its geopolitical dimensions. This expanded Introduction (and the special issue as a whole) therefore seeks to explore some of the implications of nation branding for geopolitics, while simultaneously utilizing the insights of critical geopolitics to shed light on nation branding practices. The Introduction makes the case for a broad conception of nation branding that challenges claims it is immutably linked to capitalist logics in an era of globalization. It subsequently explores claims that nation branding is simply an updated form of nation building and that it is also an inherently benign and peace promoting activity. The Introduction ends by highlighting how, despite claims that the contemporary prevalence of nation branding practices is indicative of a categorical shift from a geopolitical to a geoeconomic world, nation branding practices frequently remain deeply infused with rather traditional geopolitical scripts.*

#### Introduction

In an article in *Foreign Affairs* in 2001, Peter van Ham reflected on the recasting of Great Britain as 'Cool Britannia' during the early years of the New Labour government in the late 1990s.<sup>1</sup> 'Cool Britannia', he noted, was a pun on the patriotic hymn 'Rule Britannia', but not just any old pun. Whereas 'Rule Britannia' conjures images of imperialist territorial aggrandizement, great power politics and Britain's command of the seas, 'Cool Britannia' was designed to reposition the country 'as a global hub for the media, design, music, film, and fashion industries'. Britain was to be made 'hip, enterprising, and cool'. Such rebranding efforts are sometimes derided by citizens as foolish or embarrassing, while the limited attention paid to them by scholars of international politics suggests they are viewed by many as largely inconsequential. In contrast, Van Ham argued the 'Cool Britannia' campaign was highly significant and

suggestive of 'a shift in political paradigms, a move from the modern world of geopolitics and [hard] power to the postmodern world of images and influence'.<sup>2</sup> Since then, of course, many other states have also embraced the language and rhetoric of nation branding and commissioned and invested in nation branding programmes, believing that national success is increasingly dependent upon cultivating a favourable and competitive identity.

This special issue was put together in light of the fact that to date political geography and (critical) geopolitics has had little to say about the phenomenon.<sup>3</sup> This is surprising in several respects. First, it sits at odds with the more general literature on place branding in human geography, which has in particular focused on the politics, practices and consequences of the rebranding of cities and regions within states.<sup>4</sup> Such studies have focused on how such places have sought to use marketing techniques to enhance their attractiveness and thereby stimulate economic growth, viewing branding as a form of development policy. It is reasonable to consider whether the insights derived from the analysis of sub-national spaces could simply be scaled up to the national level. Although there certainly are insights from such analyses that apply to nation-states as well as cities and regions, arguably there are also important differences. As Aronczyk argues, since

'the nation is still the container for rights and claims that are not yet possible at other levels of organization... the origins, objectives, and desired outcomes of nation branding are not the same. Nation branding is promoted as a way to

resolve old antagonisms and forms of power. It orients attention toward cultural identities as forms of distinction rather than toward political or military might'<sup>5</sup>

and an analysis of which can also highlight tensions over issues such as multicultural policy, social democracy and conditions of citizenship.

Second, and more particularly, it is also surprising insofar as linking together much of the more critical literature on nation branding in other disciplines (see note 3) is the belief – like Van Ham – that the advent of nation branding practices both signifies and further enhances rather fundamental transformations in the underpinning logics upon which much of international politics operates. In IR theory terms this is often couched as a transformation away from a Hobbesian world of 'territorial states' to a Lockean world of 'competition states'.<sup>6</sup> This accompanies a broader background where post-cold war 'globalization' is seen as the new paradigm for geopolitical thinking and where geopolitical and geoeconomic worlds are rubbing up against each other in new ways.<sup>7</sup>

Such transformations, it is argued, are in particular manifest in a changing politics of national identity, from a prior focus on building national solidarity via an alleged search for the 'authentic self' to an emphasis on identity and culture as malleable resources to be moulded in order to enhance one's competitiveness and attractiveness in the new 'attention economy'.<sup>8</sup> In such a perspective, what counts most is not the search for one's own authenticity, but the pursuit of attributes that would transnationally influence others to recognize one as more valuable or

attractive. Identity, therefore, is increasingly being conceived as potentially conferring a competitive edge and as such appears as an outward-oriented continuation of geopolitics by other means, as well as offering what might be termed a 'compensatory imagination' of national achievement and (self)-esteem enhancement for national populations when oriented inwards.

Critical geopolitics' limited engagement with nation branding is also puzzling insofar as (national) image(s) have become an increasingly central part of its concerns. Recent work on popular geopolitics, for instance, has manifested a growing engagement with the dispersed significance of cultural representation for (geo)politics.<sup>9</sup> Parallel to this, increasing attention has been given to the renewed relevance of prestige politics and reputation in the context of emergent powers.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, investigation into the thought of some of the earliest geopolitical theoreticians – such as Rudolf Kjellén – has also probed the possibility of 'cultural' assets having been conceived of as important tools for geopolitical contests between nation states.<sup>11</sup>

This special issue is therefore designed as an initial foray into the implications of nation branding for geopolitics, while simultaneously utilizing the theoretical and conceptual insights of critical geopolitics to shed a light on nation branding practices. The purpose of this introductory article is therefore to raise a number of issues which the following case specific articles speak to. We start by outlining the dominant position in the literature that sees the advent of nation branding as a recent phenomenon, immutably tied up with capitalist logics in an era of globalization. Here, we also briefly point to the main criticisms of the practice raised by more critical analyses. However,

claims about historical novelty that link nation branding to capitalism and globalization can be overplayed. Instead of taking the claim as given, in the following section we suggest it is best viewed as a point for exploration. A more nuanced view, we argue, highlights that nation branding practices have significant historical precedents. We therefore argue for a broader conception of nation branding and one that more explicitly recognizes that nation branding practices can be underpinned by a variety of logics – and not simply those typically associated with how best to respond to globalized capitalism. Following this, the Introduction discusses two more specific claims in the literature. First, that nation branding is simply an updated form of nation building, and second, that nation branding is inherently benign and peace promoting. This then leads into a third discussion highlighting how, despite the claims to transformation inherent in much of the literature, nation branding practices frequently remain deeply infused with rather traditional geopolitical scripts, thereby further suggesting that claims concerning a categorical shift from a world of geopolitics to one of geoeconomics may lack sufficient nuance.

The collection of articles that follows in this special issue and the specific cases that they individually address engage with these themes to differing degrees. At a general level the selection of cases analysed is justified in terms of both their geographical spread and the political diversity of the countries and regions seeking to mobilize their identities and brands competitively. This is important in escaping the tendency to see nation branding as primarily an activity engaged in by Western states. The cases therefore cover countries and regions in Europe, Asia, Africa and Latin America and political systems that span the range from model democracies to authoritarian

dictatorships. In this respect, all of the cases raise challenges for various assumptions embedded within much of the nation branding literature; such as whether nation branding is fundamentally connected to logics of capitalism (in particular compare the analyses of North Korea, Russia and Chile), is inherently peace promoting (compare the analyses of North Korea and South Africa) or is unproblematically supportive of nation building dynamics (compare the analyses of Turkey, Chile and South Africa).

At the same time, the special issue also provides two analyses of branding at the macro-regional level (Norden and Africa), analyses which, more precisely, highlight how state directed efforts of nation branding often seek to connect with and mobilise macro-regional geopolitical brands and identities (a point also evident in some of the more specifically state-focused case studies – e.g. Turkey, South Africa). These cases not only highlight the politically contested nature of region branding, but also compare a region with an historically positive image (Norden) with one with an historically negative representation (Africa). This raises important questions as to why and how states engage in macro-regional branding, with the African case specifically focusing on the extent to which region branding can be viewed as a form of emancipatory-oriented subaltern geopolitics challenging the established hegemonic geopolitical scripts of global politics. In all the cases, however, focus is directed towards who the key actors and audiences are and uncovering the extent to which nation branding operates as a form of geopolitical practice in contemporary world politics.

### **From Geopolitics to Geoeconomics?**

For most proponents, practitioners and analysts the growth in the phenomenon of nation branding since the late 1990s is both symptomatic of, and further driving, an essential shift in the underlying logics of international politics. According to this view a Hobbesian world of 'territorial states', with an emphasis on power politics, is giving way to a Lockean world of 'competition states', where the emphasis instead is on economic interdependence and trade. In this Lockean world it is claimed the nature of inter-state competition is increasingly shifting away from an emphasis on the balance of power, war and the monopolization of resources, to a preoccupation with trade and cultural capital, and where status, prestige and success is less a function of one's conquests and military prowess, but is increasingly tied to one's perceived attractiveness and ability to capture the attention of others. In short, in the new world soft power has come to trump hard power, with the mobilization of identity and culture – not least through the rhetoric and practices of nation branding programmes – deemed essential in developing a competitive edge in order to secure economic, political and (self)-esteem benefits.

What we are witnessing, it is therefore claimed, is a fundamental transformation in the nature of international anarchy, the nature of statehood and the very character of international relations, a transformation in which realist logics of power politics and anarchy are replaced by those of neoliberal globalization and hierarchy.<sup>12</sup> In such a world, to be competitive new strategies are needed, not least because globalization is collapsing formerly established distinctions between the state and the market. Hence, national interests are increasingly being defined in economic terms, with state leaders



increasingly prone to define their states as business actors, be it as 'Corporation Germany' or 'UK plc'.<sup>13</sup> When referred to in this way, it is perhaps unsurprising that state leaders have also increasingly become viewed, less as political representatives leading peoples, as opposed to managers tasked with developing and deploying corporate strategies in the interests of facilitating industry and movements of global capital.<sup>14</sup>

Nation branding, it is argued, is key to this. It is, as the branding consultant Simon Anholt puts it, a 'license to trade', since to lack a brand is to be unseen and unknown.<sup>15</sup> It is also argued that lacking a nation brand is potentially dangerous as it suggests political leaders lack sufficient concern for establishing and defending their nation's reputation, for which a nation brand is deemed essential.<sup>16</sup> To quote Anholt again:

'the only sort of government that can afford to ignore the impact of its national reputation is one which has no interest in participating in the global community, and no desire for its economy, its culture or its citizens to benefit from the rich influences and opportunities that the rest of the world offers them'.<sup>17</sup>

It is therefore argued that nation branding has become increasingly important in fostering development, and even that the lack of a nation brand may, in some cases, be a primary cause of underdevelopment – as in claims that African underdevelopment is primarily a consequence of African states' failure to tackle the negative branding of the continent by others through images of poverty, conflict,

famine and disease, as opposed to being a result of colonial legacies and structurally exploitative terms of trade.<sup>18</sup>

Understandably, ideas of categorical structural transformation, of the geopolitical being succeeded by the geoeconomic, constitute a key marketing tool of nation branding consultants touting for business. As Ståhlberg and Bolin have noted, branding consultants often need 'to work hard to convince people of the core ideas in the nation branding discourse; that we live in a world in which each nation has to take command of its own reputation; that tourists and investors have to be tricked into coming; that the domestic industry can only export if their products come from an attractive place; that the country is associated with "wrong" things internationally, that is, that international media only report negative news or nothing at all; and – last but not least – that every other country does it'.<sup>19</sup> Central to this discourse is the idea that national character and identity has become key to a nation's competitiveness, a potential resource of added value, but also a potential liability if poorly cultivated and deployed.<sup>20</sup> Since the early 1990s this view has been reinforced by developments in the benchmarking criteria of organizations like the World Economic Forum, which has increasingly incorporated cultural factors as part of its measures of nations' relative 'attractiveness' and 'competitiveness' in its Global Competitiveness Reports, with the widespread reporting of these indexes further enhancing the penetration and legitimacy of the competition state discourse.<sup>21</sup> Such benchmarking practices, of course, also reinforce a move away from an emphasis on anarchy to hierarchy in international politics. However, where the nation branding industry goes further is in suggesting that culture/identity is not simply one amongst a broader list of variables

impacting on a state's competitiveness, but in suggesting that identity/culture is *the* underpinning core variable.<sup>22</sup> The success nation branding practitioners have had in propagating this discourse is evident in the spread of nation branding programmes globally and in the extent to which representatives from otherwise diverse countries have come to adopt 'the vocabulary and techniques used by the international nation-branding industry'.<sup>23</sup>

Typically critics of nation branding have argued that the pre-eminent role ascribed to national brand identity in determining a nation's overall competitiveness and ability to secure 'its share of the world's commercial, political and cultural transactions'<sup>24</sup> entails various consequences, some of which they view as inherently problematic. First, in viewing identity and culture as 'fixed assets' <sup>25</sup> for mobilization and international consumption they become instrumentalized and commodified. This, it is argued, has several effects for how identity and culture are conceived, embodied, performed and materialized. For instance, it tends to result in identity, culture and history being decontextualized and depoliticized in favour of their strategic reassembly in whatever way is deemed might best suit the nation internationally, ultimately resulting in what Kaneva and Popescu label a form of 'national identity lite'.<sup>26</sup> In turn, since their value is rescripted in terms of their (usually economic) utility, expressions of identity and culture deemed appropriate for building nation brands are also likely to be circumscribed by the perceived demands of the marketplace. This essentially shifts the production of identity and culture away from a deeper engagement with contending ideas about the nation's history and identity to prioritizing and seeking to satisfy the (consumerist) desires of market players.<sup>27</sup> One

result of this is that it easily fosters a predilection towards self-stereotyping<sup>28</sup> as nations seek to carve out a particular niche identity for themselves – although as is often remarked in regard to place branding more generally, in the end most places end up proclaiming their difference by drawing on exactly the same sorts of motifs and emphasizing the same sorts of attributes as every other place.<sup>29</sup> In other words, nation branding fosters emulation as much as it does differentiation.

Second, critics also worry that nation branding is inherently depoliticizing and undemocratic. The particular concern is the way in which the formulation and implementation of nation branding programmes is typically outsourced to (usually) foreign based branding consultants. Insofar as citizens are asked for their views through focus groups and internet portals, Volcic and Andrejevic suggest this typically functions as little more than a legitimization exercise of illusory ‘democratic co-creation’, for the reason that it is the consultants who in the end determine what counts and what type of identity is to be crafted.<sup>30</sup> And what is seen to count matters. Focusing on Germany, for instance, Varga has noted how German national identity was ‘simply re-described within the vocabulary of neo-liberalism’.<sup>31</sup> The key concept became that of Germany and Germans as *spielmacher* (‘playmakers’), a concept that immediately brings to mind notions of competition, with the branding programme further emphasizing Germans’ coolness, flexibility and playfulness. As Varga notes, programmes such as this seem to be less about celebrating national identity and culture and more about promoting and selling the idea of Germany and Germans as archetypal entrepreneurial neoliberal subjects.<sup>32</sup> Thus he notes, ‘the problem “what should Germany export as her identity?” is prevented from even occurring. Germany

is risk-taking, flexible, and willing to permanently re-work and change itself – what more could markets ask?’

Last, it is also claimed that nation branding operates as a form of governmentality or ‘technique of governance’<sup>33</sup> by seeking to reconstitute the responsibilities of citizenship in terms of ‘living the brand’. Citizens, it is typically argued, need to understand that the brand will only succeed if they also take responsibility for its implementation and engage in appropriate ‘on brand’ forms of behaviour.<sup>34</sup> Although Ståhlberg and Bolin, and Jiménez-Martínez in this issue, are no doubt correct in questioning the ability of governments to orchestrate branding campaigns and manipulate their citizens in quite the ways that concern critics of nation branding,<sup>35</sup> it is certainly the case that practitioners and statesmen in charge of nation branding programmes do frequently make precisely such invocations.<sup>36</sup>

### **Nation Branding in Historical Perspective**

Elements of the above concerns with nation branding are reflected in several of the contributions to this special issue. At this point, however, it is necessary to emphasize that, in our view, claims of a categorical shift from geopolitical to geoeconomic worlds can be overplayed. As Cowen and Smith suggest, they resonate with the teleological view of Luttwak who in the early 1990s also suggested that geopolitical calculation was being replaced by a new era of globalization with its attendant market logics of social interaction and exchange.<sup>37</sup> The basic problem with this Luttwakian perspective,

however, is that it is too categorical, too teleological; it does away with hybridity and the ambivalence inherent in change. After all, just a cursory overview of contemporary international politics suggests traditional geopolitical scripts remain much in evidence and that the claim is therefore problematically oversimplified<sup>38</sup> and arguably guilty of hidden geographical assumptions,<sup>39</sup> extrapolating developments in relations amongst the global capitalist core to the rest of the world.

Instead, Cowen and Smith offer a more nuanced view suggesting emerging geoeconomic forms are not replacing traditional geopolitical calculations but are recasting them in light of market logics.<sup>40</sup> Thus, we find that even traditional geopolitical practices like war and the control of borders have become increasingly infused with neoliberal and market logics, where the boundaries between the public and the private, the state and the market, the domestic and the international become ever more blurred. However, while we agree with Cowen and Smith that the infusing of more traditional geopolitical logics with (neoliberal) geoeconomic logics is widespread in many parts of the world, we would resist the suggestion that it is the only game in town. Indeed, as they note, '[t]he rise of geoeconomic calculation is highly uneven temporally as well as spatially, it is episodic, and it can never fully supplant geopolitics'.<sup>41</sup>

However, if the claim that geoeconomics has replaced geopolitics is overstated, then so too is the claim of Van Ham noted in the Introduction that we are moving 'from the modern world of geopolitics and power to the postmodern world of images and influence', suggesting as it does that states trapped in the world of modern geopolitics

lacked a concern for images and their manipulation in order to achieve influence. States have always paid attention to matters of image and identity policy in their relations with others with this raising the question of how different nation branding is to other related practice-based concepts, such as: public and cultural diplomacy, national marketing and image policy, information work, enlightenment policy, propaganda.

For the most part, of course, nation branding consultants are keen to distinguish their offering, viewing nation branding as *sui generis*. This is largely because they view it as offering a more holistic and joined up approach to marketing the nation across multiple sectors, and therefore much less limited in focus than public diplomacy, for instance, with its more specific emphasis on public relations and generating understanding for policy decisions. Indeed, nation branding, it is suggested, is not about selling policy at all, but constituting and selling identity.<sup>42</sup>

However, while it is clear why consultants and practitioners would wish to distance nation branding from association with more pejorative labels like propaganda a more historical perspective suggests nation branding may not be as distinctive as typically proclaimed. The point here is that concepts like propaganda, information work, public diplomacy, image policy etc. have historically lacked fixed meaning. What we find, therefore, is that historically states have used different concepts to refer to the same sorts of image and reputation-based practices, or have simply re-badged existing activities as established terms fell out of favour – for instance, Finland relabeling ‘propaganda’ as ‘information work’ after the Second World War as a result of the

former term having gained increasingly negative connotations.<sup>43</sup> What is important to emphasize, however, is that in different contexts the actors and target audiences involved in these various practices – however labeled – has varied significantly. For example, in some contexts national image promotion tends to be focused at the level of largely closed forums of classical international diplomacy, with the target audience of such efforts typically constituted by a small international political elite.<sup>44</sup> In other contexts, however, the target audience might be broader, e.g. the transnational economic elite or citizens of other countries in general – such as in tourism campaigns. Importantly, the difference here is not simply one of scale of ambition or resources, but relates to the fact that different image promotion policies are typically driven by varying objectives and are therefore liable to be designed to have different constitutive effects.

With this in mind Clerc and Glover have argued that we can identify different logics of national identity and image promotion at play.<sup>45</sup> The first they term a cultural policy of ‘enlightening’ and educating foreigners about the country, the aim being to secure recognition. Nation branding here operates as a mechanism for claiming subjectivity and status seeking. For instance, despite essentially believing that nation branding is fundamentally a product of liberal capitalism, Aronczyk still notes that a core motivation of many countries in adopting nation branding campaigns (particularly in Eastern Europe and Africa) is to ‘convey to the world that they are “normal” and that they “work”’.<sup>46</sup> While in the cases she analyses such claims are largely driven by a desire to enhance the states’ attractiveness to transnational capital and market actors, they are also concerned with establishing legitimacy on the international stage



and/or domestically. This, for example, is a particular issue for small nations and micro-states seeking recognition for their very nationhood, where the key problem is often perceived as one of international ignorance and the need to convince key constituencies that the nation meets the criteria for statehood. In such contexts, simply propagating information about a country is a way of establishing the nation's right to exist for foreigners.<sup>47</sup> For the micro-state Qatar, therefore, Peterson argues branding has been nothing less than a strategy of state survival.<sup>48</sup>

The second logic identified is that of 'diplomacy', where national identity and image promotion is conceptualized 'as a tool in high politics'.<sup>49</sup> In such terms, therefore, nation branding may be utilized to help secure the state's preferred position in the international system, or to pursue particular goals. For example, during the Cold War Finland went to considerable efforts to brand itself as a Nordic country and carve out a role for itself as a bridge builder. As Eun-jeong Cho notes in her contribution to this issue, North Korea similarly utilizes nation branding policies to carve out an altogether different role as a primary defender against the (alleged) imperialist advances of the United States.

Lastly, they identify a third logic premised on 'promoting commerce' and "'selling" the nation for the purpose of promoting economic growth', with this reflecting the narrower conception that links nation branding to economic competition in globalized markets.<sup>50</sup> In our view, and following Clerc and Glover, restricting nation branding to just this phenomenon – as much of the literature on nation branding does – limits our understanding of the ways in which nations have strategically mobilized their

identities. While it is in some sense an arbitrary choice to argue for a broader conceptualization of nation branding that captures a wider array of competitive identity practices, limiting nation branding to economic motivations alone is not only equally as arbitrary, but also problematically suggests that the techniques deployed in commercially driven nation branding are unique. As the following contributions make clear this is not the case. Operating with these three logics (cultural, diplomatic, economic) also adds historical sensitivity to the competitive identity practices of different nations. For example, Varga has noted how over the last century Germany has shifted from an initial emphasis on 'cultural nationalism' (seeking to educate both Germans and foreigners about the nature of the newly formed state) to 'cultural diplomacy' during the Cold War (with the aim of 'regaining trust and securing political stability') to 'commercial nationalism' in the 1990s (via embracing the language of the competition state discourse).<sup>51</sup> The key thing to recognize, however, is that while the German case suggests a temporal progression from cultural to diplomatic to economic logics of competitive identity practice different states may prioritize different logics at different times, or even run with them concomitantly. This, for example, is highlighted clearly in Szostek's analysis of competitive identity and nation branding practices of contemporary Russia. However, as Szostek notes, the Russia example also highlights that when competitive identity and nation branding practices informed by different logics are undertaken alongside each other, there is no guarantee they will not counteract, as opposed to reinforce, each other – as evident in the tension between Russia's efforts to reaffirm a role as a great power under a diplomatic/geopolitical logic, and its efforts to present itself as a normal cosmopolitan state ripe for capitalist investment, under a (geo)economic logic. Insofar as states like Russia can be seen to

be straddling the divide between Hobbesian and Lockean worlds then such tensions may be inevitable, but as noted below, they are not confined to these sorts of situations alone. What the cases do affirm, though, is that states can mobilise nation branding and competitive identity practices in different and not entirely coherent ways.

So far we have argued against claims of a categorical shift from a geopolitical to a geoeconomic world and as such also argued that 'the world of images and influence' is not confined to the postmodern neoliberal realm. However, it is important to recognize that some important changes have occurred. First, although competitive identity and nation branding practices are not new they have arguably become more important as a result of globalization and new technologies, which not only enhances interconnectedness and communications, but expands the global audience(s) to which states are exposed. In a 'world of flows'<sup>52</sup> and global communications an attention economy has emerged that it is increasingly difficult to avoid and states are undoubtedly seeking to target wider and larger audiences, both geographically and socially. Second, it is also important to note that while states may play on three logics of competitive identity and nation branding practice, shifting from an emphasis on cultural or diplomatic logics to a prioritization of economic logics of commercial nationalism is not just an issue of changing the focus of competitive identity practices but also entails reconceptualizing states as means rather than ends. Thus, while under cultural and diplomatic logics competitive identity and national image promotion is directed to upholding the very idea, existence and success of the state, under

economic logics the state and its various cultural assets are increasingly seen as subordinated to market logics and with a key role in reproducing them.

We now turn to discuss two more specific claims about nation branding, both of which are strongly normative: that nation branding is little more than a synonym for contemporary practices of nation building, and that nation branding is an inherently peace enhancing practice. Rejecting the simplicity of these two claims, we point to the significance of a geopolitical perspective in examining nation branding.

### **Is Nation Branding Nation Building?**

The first claim, then, is that nation branding is simply an updated form of nation building. This claim has gained credence, not least because Wally Olins, one of the early pioneers of the practice as a (nation) branding consultant from the 1990s onwards, has been adamant that contemporary nation branding is little different from the attempts of nascent nations to symbolically establish themselves by acquiring flags, anthems, institutions, currencies and national histories.<sup>53</sup> In other words, '[a]lthough the technologies are new and infinitely more powerful and pervasive than ever before, and the word "brand" is also new, the concepts which it encompasses are as old as the nation itself';<sup>54</sup> for him nation branding and nation building are therefore synonymous. Support for this claim can be found in several respects. Not least, as Ståhlberg and Bolin note, at first sight anyway, the logos, images and slogans characteristic of contemporary nation branding campaigns do bear some similarity to

the 'flagging' practices Olins sees as central to nation building and could be read through Billig's notion of 'banal nationalism', a concept he introduced 'to describe the routine, everyday, practices that symbolically reproduce the idea of a nation but which hardly create much exaltation', but are rather designed as constant reminders of one's national home.<sup>55</sup> Indeed, it is important to note that nation branding campaigns are frequently provided with internal motivations to enhance the nation's sense of social cohesion and self-esteem, as well as appealing to outsiders,<sup>56</sup> a point which Cornelissen notes in this issue was at the heart of South Africa's nation branding efforts with its aim to overcome the legacy of apartheid.

However, while nation branding may support nation building in some contexts this is not necessarily the case. Thus, given the predominantly external orientation of nation branding programmes it is important to remember the principal goal remains that of attracting others to visit and invest capital by encouraging them to *identify with* the nation – the aim is not to encourage them to view themselves *as members* of the nation.<sup>57</sup> Consequently, it is also not unusual to find dissonance between nation branding and nation building processes, especially in situations when the needs of both are seen to differ. For instance, the government of Uzbekistan has adopted very different messages with respect to its internal and external audiences. As Marat notes, this is in recognition of the fact that what might sell or be appropriate internationally – especially if the aim is that of appealing to global markets – might not resonate internally. Insofar as contemporary nation branding programmes have become ensconced in economic logics of global capitalism and are principally targeted at appealing to outsiders' desires then it is evident they might not actually foster nation

building at all.<sup>58</sup> Again, Marat indicates that for newly emergent nations what counts internally might be appealing to or recovering particular national histories, or celebrating successes in democratic development, all things that might be ‘of little relevance to investors or tourists from established democracies’ who might be more interested in ‘products, people or places’.<sup>59</sup> Indeed, in the case of Estonia, Jordan has noted that the nation branding programme initiated around the country’s hosting of the Eurovision Song Contest was in clear tension with nation building prerogatives of the need to incorporate Russian speakers in the national project. Instead, the branding campaign presented the country in overwhelmingly ethno-linguistic terms with Russian speakers and heritage explicitly excluded<sup>60</sup> – presumably because, while Estonia wishes to be seen as embracing European norms of multiculturalism, it has also spent much of the post-Cold War period trying to establish a sense of difference and distance from Russia in the minds of foreigners.

A couple of additional points can also be noted. First, insofar as nation branding does enhance nation building then it does so primarily by seeking to play on the sense of status that is seen to be attached to the national brand, from what ‘others think of us’, as opposed to an emphasis on what it is that ‘we think binds us’ together – such as kinship ties. The idea, as Aronczyk notes, is that ‘national leaders hope to generate positive foreign public opinion that will “boomerang” back home, fostering both domestic consensus or approbation of their actions as well as pride and patriotism within the nation’s borders’.<sup>61</sup> A good example of this was provided by British Prime Minister David Cameron in a speech in the context of the referendum on Scottish independence in 2014.

Sometimes we can forget just how big our reputation is – that the world over the letters ‘UK’ stand for unique, brilliant, creative, eccentric, ingenious. We come as a brand – and a powerful brand... If we lost Scotland, if the UK changed, we would rip the rug from our own reputation. The fact is we matter more in the world if we stay together.<sup>62</sup>

Cameron’s motivating argument here is not what the English, Scots, Welsh and Northern Irish might think of each other, but rather what others think of them – which Cameron suggests should be a source of national pride and self-esteem. International standing and status, rather than kinship, should be reason enough to stay together. Indeed, when argued this way shared notions of kinship, history and identity only matter insofar as they can be mobilized as brand enhancers, a view quite at odds with more traditional notions of nations as imagined communities. As Marklund argues in his contribution, however, such status seeking through national brand promotion abroad can also perform a disciplining function domestically by providing a powerful political and ontological incentive to live up the expectations created.

The second point is that Cameron’s type of argument also reinforces a notion that nation branding and deployments of competitive identity are impregnated with strategic motivations. For instance, all articles in this issue emphasize the strategic nature of branding narratives. This is evident, of course, in the fact that nation branding programmes and the deployment of competitive identity practices, is precisely targeted at convincing, educating and attracting others. However, as

Rumelili and Süleymanoğlu-Kürüm argue, just because nation branding practices may be strategic in motivation does not mean they might not also have ontological effects generating debate and tension over the (authentic) nature of national identity. As such, even though we have demonstrated there are good reasons for rejecting Olins' assertion that nation branding is synonymous with nation building, and noted that nation branding can obstruct nation building efforts as well as support them, it is important to remain attentive to the fact that nation branding programmes and practices of competitive identity do still impact on identity debates at an ontological level, though the outcome of this impact is not given *a priori*.

### **Nation Branding and Peace**

The second normative claim prominent in contemporary debates is that nation branding promotes peace. As Van Ham argues:

'state branding is gradually supplanting nationalism. The brand state's use of its history, geography, and ethnic motifs to construct its own distinct image is a benign campaign that lacks the deep-rooted and often antagonistic sense of national identity and uniqueness that can accompany nationalism. By marginalizing nationalist chauvinism, the brand state is contributing greatly to the further pacification of Europe'.<sup>63</sup>



Ultimately this claim is intimately connected to the suggestion discussed at the start of this article, that the practice of nation branding signifies a shift in political paradigms away from a Hobbesian world of Westphalian states to a Lockean world of competition states. In a Lockean world, it is argued, 'Branding appears as a benign form of national consciousness, because elements that are not benign are not permissible within a nation branding framework'.<sup>64</sup> Branding, it is assumed, will promote benign cosmopolitan and inclusive (even if competitive) identities, in contrast to chauvinist nationalism.

Indeed, nation branding consultants like Simon Anholt have not only been keen advocates of the idea that nation branding entails a peace dividend, but actively suggest making a nation's beneficence a foundational part of its competitive identity strategy.<sup>65</sup> In his view, the best way to enhance a state's reputation is to stop asking what the rest of the world can do for you and identify some of the world's most intractable problems and offer to solve them.<sup>66</sup> It is no coincidence that several countries he has advised (more than 50) – and others besides – have taken his advice. Thus, states as diverse as Finland and Colombia, Turkey and South Africa (the latter two explored in this issue) have emphasized peace/conflict resolution as part of their nation branding strategies. From this perspective, branding is viewed as an inherently progressive force to tackle various of the world's social ills.

There are a couple of reasons why this claim should be treated cautiously, however. The first concerns the assumption dealt with earlier that nation branding is a product of (and further promoting) a shift away from geopolitical towards geoeconomic logics.

If nation branding and competitive identity is not confined to geoeconomic logics, as we have argued, then it may be dangerous to generalize in this way. For instance, if branding is understood as a set of techniques and practices there is no reason it cannot be used for less beneficent purposes. Indeed, this is the argument Eun-jeong Cho makes in her analysis of the North Korean case, where she notes that Pyongyang's nation branding efforts have a distinctly antagonistic nature to them. Szostek points out likewise in respect of Russia. Indeed, the North Korean case is also interesting in that it raises the question of whether the emphasis on enhancing a state's global attractiveness and appeal is actually overplayed in the nation branding literature. After all, the North Korean regime's competitive identity strategies are not obviously designed to be enticing to foreigners but, as Cho notes, are underpinned by a clear rationale and purpose, which is to be recognized as a significant entity in world politics. Much might also be said about the branding strategies of non-state organizations like ISIS/Daesh, which while seeking to generate admiration amongst some are also clearly seeking to spread fear and anxiety amongst others. While utilizing the most up to date technologies and branding techniques the messages ISIS/Daesh send out are anything but promoting peace.

Second, there is, however, also reason to question whether nation branding promotes peace even in those instances when it is solely driven by geoeconomic logics – an assumption which is in any case already problematic in that it reproduces the doubtful (liberal) assumption that economic competition is necessarily or tendentially not violent. The issue here is that insofar as branding results in cultural and public diplomacy being commercialized the rationale seems to shift from promoting

understanding between cultures to the furtherance of purely economic goals. For example, in his analysis of the development of the competitive identity practices of Germany Varga notes that until the beginning of the 1990s German cultural diplomacy was driven by 'the primary goal of regaining trust and securing political stability'.<sup>67</sup> The emphasis was therefore on identifying those 'cultural, historical, and political elements that were *shared*' [original emphasis] with others, targeting 'individual members of foreign countries as *citizens*' [original emphasis]. Since the 1990s, however, and impregnated with discourses of the competition state, the primary goal has become economic, with the emphasis instead on differentiating Germany's brand image from that of others, with foreigners no longer targeted as citizens, 'but as *consumers*' [original emphasis].<sup>68</sup> As he puts it, 'The immanent potential of cultural and linguistic encounters as helping to contribute to creating trust, political stability, and peaceful international relations is downplayed, while culture and identity – now shaped and re-fashioned after market demand – become instruments to strategically advance the "Standort"'.<sup>69</sup> Varga's suspicions have been similarly affirmed by Mordhorst in his analysis of Denmark's response to the Mohammed Cartoon Crisis, where he notes that an initial public diplomacy drive designed to explain and convince others of Denmark's policy choices (thereby reducing the gap between self and other by enhancing understanding) was soon replaced by a nation branding campaign embedded 'in the logics of commercial marketing' that simply ignored the negative images and fallout of the Cartoon Crisis in favour of propagating other images they viewed as more positive for Denmark, thereby essentially reaffirming the violent gap between the Danish self and the Arab/Islamic other.<sup>70</sup>

## **Conclusion: Branding and Geopolitics**

Finally, claims about both the inherently benign nature of nation branding and that the advent of contemporary commercialized nation branding practices represents a categorical shift away from the world of traditional geopolitics are also undermined in light of the fact that contemporary nation branding programmes often remain deeply infused with significant geopolitical scripts. Therefore, far from heralding an age of geoeconomic playful competition, or innocently promoting peace building, social cohesion and ontological security, nation branding operates within a world where states seek to discipline narratives in order to secure sectional advantages. As in all such pursuits, geopolitical discursive strategies are fraught with tensions and balancing acts between different audiences and narratives. Nation-branding thus should be understood, not as transcending the field of geopolitics, but as a (new) strategic tool for the politics of geographical imaginations.

In the first instance, it is important to note that geography – and geopolitical location more specifically – occupies a central position in many nation branding campaigns. This is particularly the case for countries seeking to transform a stigmatized geopolitical location into a more positive one. One particular way of doing this is to reposition the country as a gateway, bridge or crossroads between regions, thereby reconstituting one's perceived 'betweenness' as a geopolitical asset and opportunity. For example, Kazakhstan has positioned itself as a 'Crossroads of Civilisations' at the 'Heart of Eurasia', thereby depicting itself as blending, 'in a most harmonious way, all the contrasts between the East and the West'.<sup>71</sup> In cases such as this an emphasis on

countries as hybrid linking spaces is designed to reinforce cosmopolitan notions of identity and substitute assumptions of being peripheral with visions that place them as geopolitical centres or points of confluence.

At the same time, such geopolitical branding often appears double-edged and prone to reinforce established geopolitical hierarchies. For example, in the case of Kazakhstan one might consider why the geopolitical marker of preference is Eurasia rather than Central Asia, and why one of its other straplines depicts it as a 'Road to Europe'.<sup>72</sup> In short the aim appears to be to tie the country to Western states and the privileged European category.

In their contribution Rumelili and Süleymanoğlu-Kürüm note that Turkey has embarked on a very similar geopolitical branding strategy, actively positioning the country between East and West, depicting itself as a mediator between civilizations. It has sought to do this by emphasizing its Western elements when talking to a Western audience and its Eastern elements when engaging Eastern audiences. However, they argue that what the Turkish case highlights is the extreme difficulty there is in escaping hegemonic geopolitical discourses, discourses which in this case have tended to depict East and West as 'binary opposites'. The result, they argue, has been that despite viewing the mobilization of a dual identity in the branding campaign as a purely strategic move, it has reignited debates at both national and international levels as to Turkey's 'real' identity, Eastern or Western. In other words, Turkey's branding strategy stumbles insofar as it is unable to transcend the established East-West geopolitical binary. Thus, as the West has become increasingly critical of Turkish

foreign and domestic policy under the Islamist AK Party, this has in turn easily resulted in the country being stigmatized as Eastern once more, with its perceived Easternness depicted as threatening.

In this respect, the contributions of Cornelissen and Browning and Ferraz de Oliveira are interesting as, in different ways, they depict attempts to fundamentally overturn hegemonic geopolitical scripts, in particular the negative images associated with the continental marker 'Africa'. One interesting point here is the assumption that the best way to respond to a stigmatizing geopolitical marker is to revamp it, rather than rejecting it in favour of another designation (the apparent strategy of Kazakhstan). What these and other contributions to the special issue (most notably Marklund) also note, however, is the extent to which nation branding campaigns have a tendency to be heavily impregnated with appeals to supranational regional and continental markers, thereby (re)producing a competitive regional geopolitics and set of assumptions at the global level.

As a final word it is important to emphasise that the contributions to this special issue are offered up here as an initial foray into the role of competitive identity in international politics and the geopolitics of nation branding more particularly. The growing prevalence of nation branding, its increasing normalization as a strategy in global politics, raises questions for the contemporary conduct and practice of geopolitics. Taken together, the following contributions suggest that the nation branding phenomenon is not easily dismissed as epiphenomenal or easily categorized as indicating a simple shift from a world of traditional geopolitics to a world of

globalization and geoeconomics. Instead, the geopolitical dimensions of competitive identity practices of nation branding are much more complex and escape easy categorization. At the same time, the contributions also demonstrate the fruitfulness of a dialogue between (critical) geopolitics and nation branding studies, and where to date there has been little discussion of some of the geopolitical narratives embedded within many nation branding strategies. In dealing with both these issues we make no claim to have provided a comprehensive or definitive analysis, but rather hope the special issue provides a spur for future debate and analysis.

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